

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks at a Women's History Month Reception

March 16, 2016

The President. Hello, everybody! Hello, hello, hello!

Audience member. We love you!

The President. You know, I can already tell this is kind of a rowdy bunch. [*Laughter*] It is good to see all of you. Welcome to the White House.

Thank you, Sana, for your incredible work. Ms. Marvel may be your comic book creation, but I think for a lot of young boys and girls, Sana is a real-life superhero. And there are a lot of them in this room, so I want to acknowledge a couple of them. First of all, we've got Cecile Richards in the house, making sure that women's health care is on the front burner. We've got America's first female NFL coach, Dr. Jennifer Welter. We have some outstanding Members of Congress, including Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi.

Now, I know I was the second choice for this gathering. [*Laughter*] You don't have to confirm it, and I know it. [*Laughter*] But Michelle has been at South by Southwest talking about her "Let Girls Learn" initiative to help 62 million girls around the world who are out of school and getting them into the classroom. So I could not be more proud of her work, and I will do my best to fill in. [*Laughter*] Because this is a pretty special event.

We have people here who have been working together to advance women's equality for decades, as well as members of a rising generation of activists and advocates and leaders who are picking up the mantle, taking the baton, and they are moving things forward. And it's because of all of you that we've accomplished so much these past 7 years.

Thanks to your efforts, the first law I signed when I came into office was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. We have expanded paid sick days and equal pay for more families, created more opportunities for women small-business owners. We passed the Affordable Care Act, which covers women's preventive care, including contraception; that says women can't be charged more for health insurance just because they're women. We are fighting hard against campus sexual assault.

Around the world, we lifted the global gag rule, developed a strategy to combat gender-based violence. And I am incredibly proud that I've appointed more female appointees and judges than any other President. In fact, the majority of my senior advisers are women, and—including on my national security team. They are a tough bunch. [*Laughter*]

And what's happening here at home is a reflection of the fact that the world has made enormous progress. A century ago, most women in the world were denied suffrage. Today, women in almost every country have the right to vote. Since 1990, maternal mortality rates have fallen by 44 percent. Women are living longer lives. We've cut extreme poverty in half. More women are going to school, earning their degrees, entering the workforce, contributing to their economies, and shaping the course of their nation.

And what we've seen, even in our own lifetimes, is that change is possible. That's why we have to keep fighting, because there are battles that still need to be won. We still need to fight for economic equality, for equal opportunities for entrepreneurs, for equal pay for equal work. We still need to make sure that paid family leave is not the exception around the country, but is

the rule, and so that women, especially low-income women, don't lose their jobs for minor things like giving birth. [Laughter] We have to end violence against women. We have to end the practices like child marriage. We've got to make sure that girls around the world have the same opportunities as boys to go to school.

And that is why we celebrate Women's History Month: not to get complacent, but to take a moment each year and celebrate the achievements that women have fought so hard to achieve and to rededicate ourselves to tackling the challenges that remain.

Now, our policies are aimed at bringing about equality. But a lot of what we have to do is not just up to government or corporate policy, it's up to each of us. One thing I've been thinking about this past week is the unique challenges women face in the virtual world. Last Friday, I was at South by Southwest, where the epidemic of online harassment was a topic of discussion. We know that women gamers face harassment and stalking and threats of violence from other players. When they speak out about their experiences, they're attacked on Twitter and other social media outlets, even threatened in their homes. One study shows that on Twitter, female journalists receive three times the abuse as their male colleagues. Too many young people face cyberbullying, especially in the LGBT community.

And what's brought these issues to light is that there are a lot of women out there, especially young women, who are speaking out bravely about their experiences, even when they know they'll be attacked for it, from feminist bloggers who refuse to be silenced to women sports reporters who are opening up about the extreme safety precautions they need to take when traveling for work. Every day, women of all ages and all backgrounds and walks of life are speaking out. And by telling their stories, by you telling your stories, women are lifting others out of the shadows and raising our collective consciousness about a problem that affects all of us.

After all, the Internet is not something separate from our lives, it is completely interwoven in our lives. It's how we connect with one another and where we get our information and how we create and break new ground and where people work and earn their livelihoods. If you're a teenager, I promise you, you are basically online all the time. [Laughter] I know. I've got a couple of them. [Laughter] The point is, the Internet is a public space where women have every right to exist freely and safely and without fear.

Audience member. That's right.

The President. And—[applause]. Now, obviously, this is not unique to the Internet. Women have been up against this kind of nonsense since the beginning of time. As long as women have dared to enter the public space, whether they're fighting for their rights or simply walking the streets, there have been times where they've been harassed by those who apparently see the mere presence of women as a threat.

But what's also true is that women have been speaking up and fighting back for just as long. And we can't let up now. And by the way, this is not just the role for women. It's about men speaking up and demanding better of themselves and their peers, their sons, their friends, their coworkers. Because we're all in this together.

Now, whenever I point out that women—or whenever I point out that any group of Americans—face challenges that some of us don't, I'm apparently being "divisive." [Laughter] There he goes again, being divisive, by pointing out that women earn less than men, or that women are frequent targets of sexual harassment, online or offline, or that women face greater

threats of sexual violence. Essentially, they're arguing that by pointing out these challenges, I'm dividing us.

I want to say to those critics, this shouldn't divide us because you should care about it too.

Audience members. That's right.

The President. This is not about one group versus another. This is about how all of us can improve the situation for all of our daughters—and all of our sons—for future generations. This should matter to all Americans. Because we know that countries where women enjoy equality and can fulfill their potential do better than countries where women are oppressed. When any group of Americans are experiencing discrimination or not being treated fairly, that hurts all of us and it undermines our ideals. It corrodes our aspiration to ensure that every single one of us is entitled to a life of liberty and that we're able to pursue our happiness.

And when our society makes it possible for women to contribute their talents to our communities, then we all win. We all succeed. When technology is the key to the 21st century and economic success, I personally would like to see more women coders. I don't want them experiencing harassment. I want them to be able to come up with the great new software that's going to revolutionize some aspect of life.

When our companies need all the talent that they can get to compete around the world, we should be encouraging every CEO to make sure their workforces are reflective of America. We should be encouraging women to chase their ambitions and climb as high as their hard work and their skills can take them.

When it's long past time for our leaders to reflect the majority of the population, wouldn't it be better for America if women weren't discouraged from seeking office because of double standards and we had more women in positions of power and high office?

Now, I want to be clear. I'm not stereotyping here. *[Laughter]* But I'm pretty sure that if we had more women in charge, things would work better. I'm pretty sure that's true. I'm not saying you all are always right. *[Laughter]* I just want to be clear about that. *[Laughter]* When—I'm in a household where I'm outnumbered, and I just want—I know there are times where you, too, can be somewhat unreasonable. *[Laughter]* But in general, as a whole, I think it's fair to say that things would be a whole lot better if it was more reflective of our populations and the people who are doing a lot of the work that gets unpaid and who are holding communities together and making community organizations work and making places of worship work and making childrearing work.

The good news is, is that we've got a real opportunity to build a freer and fairer and more just society, online and offline. And that's why this spring, we'll be hosting the first-ever White House Summit on the United States of Women. It's going to be a chance to build on the progress that we've made to advance women's equality and to address the challenges that still remain.

And I'm incredibly optimistic about what we can achieve at this summit and beyond. And I draw my optimism from the fact that we've already achieved so much. I've told this story before, but my grandmother, who helped raise me, she worked in a bank. So she worked her way up from being a secretary, with a high school education, all the way up to being the vice president of a regional bank. And she was smart, and she was hard-working, and she was really good at her job.

And at some point, she hit the glass ceiling though. And then, she trained men to do the job of "supervising" her, even though she knew the job better than they did. Today, my daughters believe that every daughter—door is open to them. They can't—they would not put up with that. *[Laughter]* It wouldn't even occur to them that they couldn't climb to the top of whatever field that they chose. In the space of one generation, women like those in this room have moved mountains. They know you can be the Speaker of the House because they've seen Nancy Pelosi. They know that they can draw comic books or can direct film or can be an astronaut or do whatever they want.

Audience members. President!

The President. They take that for—and I've got to be careful; this is not a political event. *[Laughter]*

And they've got role models like Dr. Welter, who once said, "My opportunity could create other opportunities, and I love everything about that." That's what all of you represent here. And that's the work that you've done together and with us these past 7 years, fighting for a better future for my daughters, but also for our sons.

Because I believe as much as I believe in anything that we liberate ourselves when we liberate others. We give ourselves opportunity when we give other people opportunity. We benefit when we see other people prosper. And together, I know that we can fulfill the basic promise of our Nation: that every child, no matter what her background or income or race or gender, that she can succeed. She can make of her life what she will.

You guys are all examples of that. So keep up the great work. Thank you very much. All right.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:23 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Sana Amanat, director of content and character development, Marvel Comics, LLC, who introduced the President; Cecile Richards, president, Planned Parenthood Federation of America; and Jennifer Welter, former intern linebackers coach, National Football League's Arizona Cardinals.

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